



TERROR OF THE FLUX

*Dr. Pushpa Michael

Principal, Cluny Women's College, Kalimpong, India - 734301.

ABSTRACT

Robert Frost deals with mutability of human relations and human existence. This is seconded by his nature lyrics where the landscape demonstrates this fact of mutability incessantly and obviously. Man's awareness of flux brings the unwelcome guest of fear which is ever ready to breed its progeny of seen and unseen fears. Man, unaided, finds it difficult to flush it out of the house of his self. He seeks the help of reason sometimes and of instinct or emotion at other times to enable him to continue his search for meaning of his existence on this earth. On the other hand human pride and ambition tend to take too much credit. Man should rather consider himself fortunate to have achieved whatever he has because the God he serves is arbitrary and incomprehensible. Man's best may not prove worthy in heaven's sight. In the autumn of life when everything is heading towards an end, the poet figure is seen as no fugitive, no escapist. He realizes he must decline the call to mutability and live on courageously. His sense of fear of death disappears when his courage appears.

KEYWORDS: Mutability, doomsday, existential fear of death, romantic cry of despair, practical approach to life, fear of God.

INTRODUCTION:

Man and nature undergo perpetual waste and decay, death and diminishment because they, being subject to the flux of time, have nothing but a few fleeting moments of stay in this world. On this whirling planet, poised precariously in space, man's career is doomed to be broken off, and this doom gets intensified by accidents like the one met with by the young ones of a broken nest, in Robert Frost's poem 'The Exposed Nest', and left unsheltered in a newly mown field. Here, nothing "gold" does, or can stay. Man's doom is pent-up in his bloom - - such is the inexorable law of this world.

Mutability, called flux in "New Hampshire" is termed "alternation" in "Build Soil":

...love's alternations, joy and grief,
The weather's alternations, summer and winter,
Our age-long theme (The Poetry of Robert Frost (PRF): p 317)

Nina Baym (1990) comments that in Frost's work "we have the pastoral dialogues, eclogues and monologues dealing with the mutability of human relations and human existence. ...Second, we have the nature lyrics.

Cycle of Nature's death and rebirth

To bewail the fleeting moment - - the transience of youth, beauty, love and life - - has been one recurring theme in English Poetry. But it is also true that some poets have encountered flux and mutability without lamenting it, for they know that this is the way of the world. Their practical approach to life saves them from the romantic cry of despair. One such poet is Frost, who, wherever he looks - at trees, flowers, pools, brooks, leaves, desert land, a bird or the last "lone aster", - - sees decay and diminishment, "drift" and death as part of the scheme of nature.

James Radcliffe Squires (1963) holds that "the price of looking without sentimentality at nature is knowledge of decay, death, and of the cold teeth beneath nature's lips." (p 37) Poets down the ages have brooded over the circumstances that Frost contemplates in "In Hardwood Groves" from A Boy's Will.

The epigrammatic comment on the mutability of nature extends, by implication, to the change and flux in human life:

The same leaves over and over again!
They fall from giving shade above,
Before the leaves can mount again
They must go down into the dark decayed.

(PRF: pp 25-26)

Leaves fall, decay and become compost to provide regenerative energy to the trees. In this fashion the cyclical pattern of death-life-death continues in nature, implying that death puts an end to life to let fresh life emerge out of death. The poet remarks:

However it is in some other world.
I know that this is the way in ours.

(PRF: p 26)

Steve Gowler (1982) comments on these two lines, after putting a comma between:

The mythology of nature's death and rebirth is conceived in the union of the poet's mind and nature's mysteries. ...Thus, 'some other world' is the realm of the imagination, a world in which nature is symbolically translated into an understandable and meaning-saturated process. The two readings of the concluding lines of "In Hardwood Groves" work together to express Frost's conviction that the human horror of non-causality can be symbolically and emotionally transcended through the imaginative re-appropriation of the ancient mythological cycle of life, death and rebirth. (p 48)

To rise and then to fall is the fate not only of leaves but also of the freshly formed pools which, presenting perfect picture of the sky, are ever threatened by buds (resembling caged beasts), as in "Spring Pools" (Mountain Interval). If spring comes, can summer be far behind? This is Frost's concern in this poem. In forests the pools reflecting the sky without defect become all the more beautiful like the flowers growing beside them. But these "watery flowers" and "flowery waters" are ever in danger of being replaced by the solemn summer. The danger is shut-up in buds which will darken nature by growing up as trees. The pools will be soaked dry by the vampire-like roots. All beauty will disappear leaving the scene barren of charm but not of verdure.

The warning in "think twice", in the ninth line of the poem, has no meaning, for nature and even man cannot stop the on-flow of flux. If nature falls a victim to flux then man has no chance of escaping it. He can attempt to have a foothold in this flux by writing a poem; by his awareness of this change he can survive its terror. In "Spring Pools", opines Frank Lentricchia (1975), "there is about to be perpetrated an unnameable psychological violence to which the only proper response seems to be the scream: for what is lost in the passing of spring flowers and spring pools is an inner state of resolution as well as an outer loveliness." (p 92) When one thinks of the destructive power of summer one feels like calling this "innocent little poem... a drop of pure strychnine." (p 258) Not simply pools fall a victim to the sizzling heat of summer but running brooks, too, go dry.

With the onset of summer, golden leaves and flowers pass away and beautiful brooks flow away, as in "Hyla Brook" (Mountain Interval) - - a modern nature lyric with a Frostian stamp. It is a comment on desiccated and diminished brook "left a faded paper sheet." By the middle of the year ("By June") the gush goes out of the once gurgling brook. It is no longer gay and alive with "song and speed", for its charm and beauty is transient. - - seasons change to change the scene. The brook, once bubbling with life, turns dull, dry, and dreary; and many people refuse to recognize it, but some, like Frost, who are not dismayed by the change, cherish the memory of the thing:

Either to have gone groping underground
(And taken with it all the Hyla breed
That shouted in the mist a month ago,
Like ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost
Of snow) - -

(PRF: p 119)

Frost, perhaps, suggests that the brook like its inhabitants - - the Hyla breed of frogs - - has gone into hibernation to come up alive in the proper season with its song and speed. It is the poet's memorializing act, notes Frank Lentricchia (1975), "that can 'see' the brook in weak 'jewelweed' that bends even against the direction that its waters used to flow. Once again, it is poetic memory that marries present and past." (p 52) By line ten we see the brook a dry and "faded paper sheet of dead leaves stuck together by the heat." We have now the sapless and lifeless brook-bed before us.

Frost is neither an idealist, like William Wordsworth searching for "books in running brooks," nor a Victorian shedding melancholy tears born of pessimism, but a realist, accepting what is for what is. This is nowhere better indicated than in the last line:

We love the things, we love for what they are

(PRF: p 119)

This is Frost's homage to the brook. In short, we can say that "Hyla Brook" is Frost's triumph in that he does not pine for what is not but rather makes bold to sing of what is not and still can be made to exist in the mind's eye. Frost makes the diminished thing a finished thing for the reader with his artistic finishing strokes. This is what it means "to make of a diminished thing." Marjorie Cook (1976) comments:

The world of the concrete particular can be appreciated for itself, because of itself. Frost celebrates the particular in 'Hyla Brook'. In this world the particular inevitably has its drawbacks. This specific brook runs dry, and what is left are weeds and dried, dull leaves. But the brook also has its moments of supreme beauty, and the contrast heightens the beauty. ...Accepting his historicity allows man to live in the inconclusiveness of flux and even to rest in the mystery. (p 233)

Everything under the sun is subject to change and maturity that bring in the nostalgic element in man's mind. He comes to realize that nothing that is beautiful or otherwise is permanent. Delicacy is replaced by roughness, which ultimately gives way to decline, as pictured in "Nothing gold can stay" (New Hampshire). This hui-tain deals with the theme of flux and mutability in nature, "which," perceives George F. Bagby (1991), "might well serve as the structured prototype of Frost's nature lyrics." (p 144)

Conventionally the cycle of seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter is associated with human birth, youth, old age and death. The same pattern is illustrated in just eight lines - - two lines devoted to each stage: Nature's first green is gold.

Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf's a flower;

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.

(PRF: pp 222-223)

The first five descriptive lines lament the fugacious nature of natural beauty. In strict accordance with the cyclical pattern, nature offers its first "green" which is precious like gold and beautiful like anything. But the evanescent nature of this golden hue makes its hard to hold for long. The gold changes into green, a comparatively dull hue. This early flower-like-leaf is again transitory - - "only so an hour." It soon fades and shrinks - - "leaf subsides to leaf." "Subsides" is the word on which the poem balances. William H. Pritchard (1984) remarks: "The poem is striking for the way it combines the easy delicacy of 'Her early leaf's a flower' with monumentalities about Eden and the transient fading of all such golden things, all stated in a manner that feels inevitable." (p 163)

The sixth line of the poem connects the loss of beauty in nature with man's loss of the comforts of Eden. John F. Lynen (1960) observes: "The Fall of man reveals this in human nature taken as a whole, and through the next image - - 'so dawn goes down to day' - - we see the same process in the cosmos. ...The tiny leaves, seemingly so trivial, enfold the problems of man's fate!" (p 154)

Perhaps, in writing "Nothing Gold can Stay," Frost had in mind his later definition of poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion." Robert Doyle (1965) comments: "The significant thing is to accept the moment before it passes. ...The poem 'Nothing Gold can Stay' becomes... a compliment to the gold things of the world, even if they cannot stay." (pp 140, 176) If, on the one hand, Frost's poem deserves comparison with Shakespeare's:

Golden lads and girls all must,

As Chimney, sweepers, come to dust.

(Cymbeline, IV, 2)

Then, on the other, it deserves so with Ben Jonson's

A Lily of a Day

Is fairer far, in May.

The poem is Frost's momentary stay amidst the "universal cataract of death" that "spends to nothingness." It is his comment on existential finitude and temporality.

The significant thing in life is to catch the moment in its glory, as in "Carpe Diem." This is the key to master the flux of life. This key has been found by the butterflies but they overdo, in their zeal, to rob the milkweed of the nectar which ends in conspicuous waste in "Pod of the Milk-weed" (In the Clearing). Here, the butterflies are gathered to taste the honey of the milkweed. It is so sweet that

It makes the butterflies intemperate.

There is no slumber in its juice for them.

One knocks another off from where he clings.

They knock the dyestuff off each other's wings

--

(PRF: p 411)

Frost, no stranger to loss, was fascinated by flux and in his later years "he pinpointed this fascination as 'some dim secret of the good of waste' ('Pod of the Milkweed'); where others might have inferred futility in life, he looked for purpose." (Dorothy Judd Hall 1984: pp 103-104)

...the reason why so much.

Should come to nothing must be fairly faced

(PRF: p 412)

The waste which "was of the essence of the scheme" (PRF: 412) has its precedence in "My November Guest,"

The desolate, deserted trees,

The faded earth, the heavy sky (PRF: 7)

And in "Going for water"

The barren boughs without the leaves,

Without the birds, without the breeze

(PRF: p 18)

Besides these other poems that talk of flux, waste, and diminishment are "The Oven Bird", "The Census-Taker" and "Reluctance." The second of these three poems present blankness, bleakness and decimation. Life in a virgin wilderness is not as lonely and fearsome as that in a place which has been abandoned by its inhabitants. "The Census-Taker" (New Hampshire), "not only of the bleakest but the most explicit of ...wilderness confrontations," (William Doeski 1988: p 32) portrays the mental acrobatics of a lone man who reaches a lone house - - of "one room and one window and one door" - - situated amidst a hundred square miles stretch of a lonely landscape resembling a savanna. The house, "slab-built, black-paper-covered," "peopled with the past," (Louis Untermeyer 1946: p 178) symbolizes black coffined people in their "grave" with the grave stone on it for indication. The speaker on a windy autumn evening

...came as census-taker to the waste

To count the people in it and found none,

None in the hundred miles, none in the house

(PRF: p 174)

Here, all the signs of life are negative. With the simple use of "one" (three times in line 3) and "none" (three times in lines 9 and 10) and other negatives throughout the poem Frost creates a peculiar picture of loneliness. The speaker is left to face the "people not there" amidst an "emptiness flayed to the very stone" (PRF: 174) or, with a subtle shift, an "emptiness flayed to the very bone" - - in a way, a final word on nothingness and diminishment in American poetry.

Autumn - time going to canoodle winter in the wing foreshadows more desolation. The following lines,

...when every tree

That could have dropped a leaf was down itself

And nothing but the stamp of it was left

And every tree up stood a rotting trunk
Without a single leaf to spend on autumn

(PRF: p 175)

present the diminished nature, simple reminder of the past verdure, and with autumn on its last gasp more desolation and obliteration of these contours is to follow. William Doreski (1988) points out that "the diminishment is in grandeur and innocence: each reclamation is grimmer, more insistent, and ever more inhospitable. The census-taker faces a wilderness of mutability, not of entropy, and so is free to entertain the possibility of presence in the face of absence." (p 33)

In the room with "...a door, forever off the latch" the census-taker indulges in "dreamy unofficial counting" nine souls and himself the "tenth across the threshold." Inside this uninhabited house, with its relics -- no lamp, empty table, cold stone sans one leg, the disconnected chimney -- he arms himself with the stub of an ax handle against

...people to the ear but not the eye.
...not on the table with their elbows.
...not sleeping in the shelves of bunks.
...no men there and no bones of men there

(PRF: p 175)

This collocation of negatives makes the loneliness of the speaker spectral. The house, uninhabited, had never been dwelt in by women -- the participating partners in procreation. Hence, no life could "go on living" in a house that never had the honour of becoming a home. Standing amidst these ruins the speaker is perplexed as to

"what to do that could be done --
About the house --"

(PRF: p 175)

that in a span of one year parallels the ruin of thousand years. As such, the speaker has nothing to do -- no living souls to count. This confrontation with existential nothingness fills the speaker not with despair, but desire. Undaunted by the manlessness of "a hundred square miles," branchlessness of trees, and lifelessness of the house, he declares:

'The place is desert, and let whoso lurks

Break silence now or be forever silent.

Let him say why it should not be declared so'

(PRF: p 176)

when he gets no response -- not even the buck of "The Most of It" -- he experiences the existential terror of

...having to count souls
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.

(PRF: p 176)

But a faint ray of hope is seen when the poet -- persona says,

I want life to go on living

and saves himself from the despair of the 20th century. William Doreski (1988) feels that the census-taker's "meditative voice does not dwell on religious matters but on humanist concerns, on the difficulty of maintaining a toe-hold of civilization in an abject waste." (p 32)

The speaker's desire for life to go on living can be read as his intention to spend the night in the lonely house or to stay there forever, but read in the context of Frost's other poems, especially, "Stopping of Woods on a Snowy Evening" he can stay for the night but return home the next day to keep his "promises". No doubt the speaker is the only presence among the absence, alive among the dead and gone, someone witnessing no one, vitality facing diminishment, but he can make an existential choice of returning to the land whereof he came.

As regards the elegiac dignity of the blank verse of the poem William Doreski (1988) observes that "it partially redeems a spiritually and humanly impoverished semi-wilderness landscape through the historical sensitivity of the speaker and his morally attractive desire for 'life to go on living.'" (p 30) What else can one do except translating the census-taker's desire? The answer is provided by Frost's "The Oven Bird" (Mountain Interval).

Realism in Robert Frost

Frost may write of birds or birches, landscape or seascape, the earth or the stars,

but he is never oblivious of man and there is something ironically analogous to human experience in his poems. The oven bird's "teacher-teacher" is heard in the mid-summer when all other song-birds have ceased to sing. With the glory of spring gone, the oven bird, like a realist, accommodates himself to the changed scene. He does not sing, but intones in his dry, sharp, and rasping manner. This lack of melody in the oven bird's song is in line with the lesser world -- the "diminished thing" -- he is in.

Against this diminished background the oven bird does not have lilting music to offer but the resonant voice of a survivor which "makes the solid tree trunks sound again." A "diminished thing" from the bird's point of view is mid-summer sans the glory of spring and with fall dogging its steps, but from a human angle it refers to bleakness, purposelessness, and meaninglessness of modern life as compared with the largeness and abundance of life in old times.

The poem talks of diminishment that comes in the wake of "that other fall we name the fall." This is the fall from the Garden of Eden. Hence, diminishment is everything. Robert Pack (1986) observes:

Summer is a diminishing from spring, as the oven bird says, 'as one to ten.' Fall is a diminishing from summer. The fall from the garden of Eden is a mythical diminishing. Death, the highway 'dust,' is the diminishment of life. ...the poem is a diminishing of the oven bird's loud call and its possible meanings. (All poetic form is made by choice and selection and is thus a diminishing of nature's plenitude). Aging on the highway, Frost, too, is a diminishing thing. The poem itself, however, is the poet's only answer to these questions. ...it is an order, a design to set against uncertainty, to set against 'the fall' and against death. (p 12)

The Oven bird's existential predicament: "what to make of a diminished thing" implies that Frost, like a realist, is accepting the world as it is. The important point is that he professes to be a prophet neither of doom nor of ideal perfection, but makes of the world what he can. The wisdom he explains is "in singing not to sing." The problem of the oven bird is the same as that of Pan -- what should he play?" (PRF: p 24)

Frost, like his modern counterparts has learnt how to sing an unlyrical song in those times that are not at all conducive to rapturous song. Frost's poem, for Margaret Edwards (1974), is "the nearest to a coda; to a manifesto of what this New England / American bard sought to create." (p 114)

The changing panorama of life does not sadden the poet, nor does it make him flee the scene to an ivory tower, but brings out his desire to stay this flux in his poetic utterance. This desire is expressed in "Reluctance" (A Boy's Will) where the earlier mood is of acceptance of the "drift of things" to "nothingness." Just some leaves drape the oak while the rest of leaves lie "huddled and still" on the ground, and

The last lone aster is gone;
The flowers of the witch hazel wither;
The heart is still aching to seek,
But the feet question "whither?"

(PRF: p 30)

Frost's answer is nowhere. Stay and resist, for resistance to "the drift of things" is a gesture of Frostian persona. He can do nothing else but resist because it is beyond man's control to check the flow of flux.

To be scared of flux and to surrender to it is treasonous. Frost writes that "fear is of the soul" (PRF: 519). This fear encroaches even when the doors are all closed and bolted from inside. It is not something borrowed or transplanted and is most threatening when it comes at the moment of hope, as in "Peril of Hope" (In the Clearing).

Frost and its working at night is to be feared as much as storm in "Storm Fear" and the dark in "The Draft Horse." George F. Bagby, Jr. (1991) observes that "the written poem is a very spare description of one stage in the budding and blossoming of fruit trees; the poem between the lines, to which the title directs our attention, is about the dangers which may beset fruition in a more general sense." (p 141)

Frost that makes the ground swell and spill the boulders in "Mending Wall" is present here and threatens flowery burst on the boughs. This brief late poem makes explicit the general destructiveness, treacherousness, and changeableness of the material universe (James L. Potter 1980: pp 104-105) when hope is high, danger is "nigh":

When the boughs are right
In a flowery burst
Of pink and white
That we fear the worst.

.....
 ...a night of frost. (PRF: p 445)

Frost endangers a good crop here, but storm threatens man's smugness with greater and grimmer consequences in "Storm Fear" (A Boy's Will). The storm presents a compressed picture of fear and terror. A man, with a wife and a child inside the house, feels scared of the storm raging outside which raids the inner calm of the speaker to leave him apprehensive of the "beast" challenging: "Come out! Come out! --."

The speaker is scared to the bones. His awareness of being "unaided" adds to his terror. He feels some sort of design against him; and systematic conspiracy. The word "whispers" suggests that the enemy is, not one but two "that" can whisper - the storm and its ally, the cold, that "creeps as the fire dies at length." It is nature in all its elemental fury charging his simple stronghold which cannot stay as shelter for long. The speaker's

...heart owns a doubt
 Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
 And save ourselves unaided.

(PRF: p 10)

The last word of the poem, "unaided", makes the reader feel that fear so cripples a person that even when he is sheltered he feels shelter-less; even the presence of his wife and child he can experience fear and loneliness. The whole situation of the poem concluding with this word, holds William H. Pritchard (1984), "inspires a terror of metaphysical worry, no more nor less than that, as real but perhaps as transient as the storm itself." (p 20)

In a sense "Storm Fear" is a prologue to many of Frost's poems which deal with existential loneliness and existential fear, such as "Once by the Pacific", "Bereft", "The Hill Wife", "An Old Man's Winter Night" and others. Lewis H. Miller Jr's (1974) comments on "Storm Fear" are very revealing:

...the 'storm fear' of this poem ... is the speaker's fear of his own wintry isolation from those who hold him dear ... in his 'heart' he senses the disintegration of home and family, and he comes to the stark realization that only from within ('in us') can help. 'Storm Fear' is truly a disturbing poem, and in its bleak depiction of the wild and random forces which threaten to undermine the stronghold of marriage, it anticipates the sudden and terrifying severance of 'ties' in such a later poem as 'The Hill Wife.' (pp 358-359)

The speaker, whose "fire dies at length" here, can, like the woman in "The Night Light," kindle another candle to dispel the fear born of darkness as well as the fear breeding darkness. "The Night Light" (Steeple Bush), a somber poem, dwells on the theme of light mitigating the darkness around. The light gives the woman

"... bad dreams and broken sleep
 But helped the Lord her soul to keep"
 (PRF: p 382)

A look into the plight of the woman proved contagious, and

It is on me night or day,
 Who have, as I suppose, ahead
 The darkest of it still to dread
 (PRF: p 383)

The poet experiences the existential fear of being engulfed by more and more darkness till he is wiped off the surface of the earth. Lights are there which provide security and push back the terror. But the physical light alone does not save one from fear as is made clear by "The Fear" (North of Boston), originally called "The Lantern." The poem seems to be a continuation of "The Housekeeper." The central character is "another guilt-ridden woman - a close psychological relative of the witch in 'The Witch of Coos.'" (Frank Lentricchia 1975: p 72) She has a past which is poisoning her present. Ever apprehensive of being seen and sought out by her past lover, she drifts towards paranoia. That the poem comes right after "The Housekeeper" leads one to surmise that this is the life to which Estelle has fled.

The poem at once takes the reader into the heart of a fear-ridden setting. A woman and a man return one night to their farm. The woman on seeing someone infers that her past lover is spying on her with the intention of taking revenge. Gripped by existential fear she decides to go ahead and face the worst. She challenges the stranger, who is none but a passerby. The woman apologizes; the lantern in her hand falls to the ground and goes out.

In her experience of fear she reminds the reader of the woman in "House Fear," one of the lyrics from "The Hill Wife." For the woman in "The Fear," "Doors locked and curtains drawn will make no difference" (PRF: p 89) because her fear is not only objectified but also subjectified - it is all-pervasive, inside her as well

as outside her. She feels herself safe nowhere. Gripped by fear, the woman displays symptoms of paralysis to be seen in Frost's other woman characters:

She spoke as if she couldn't turn.
 The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,
 It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out
 (PRF: p 92)

Richard Wakefield (1985) comments: "Fear becomes crippling when it is obsessive, and it becomes obsessive when it has no release." (p 189)

Joel's absence in the last lines is conspicuous, if he is absent; and if present and unresponsive, bespeaks something different. His absence, most probably, means he is beyond the circuit of the lantern. That is why "she spoke as if she couldn't turn" (means "reach and pass") and consequently the lantern fell to the ground and went out.

In sum, the poem conveys that only "A lantern-light...went out" but not the "light" of life of the woman, as many critics interpret it. "The Fear" is different from "The Hill Wife" series because it depicts confrontation with the stranger and, thus, relieves the terror of "something" in the dark. It stands, in all Frost, as a powerful portrait of a nameless woman experiencing a nameless fear, matched only by "A Servant to servants," where the fear of madness looms large.

Being left alone in life with no one to depend on makes the woman in "The Fear" the Kin of the figure in "Bereft." The "themes of betrayal, of fear, of loss of love, of being 'bereft,' are strong in Frost's poetry." (Elaine Barry 1973: p 5) The speaker of the poem, "Bereft" (West-Running Brook), experiences a sense of complete alienation from other men, nature, and even God, which fills him with explicable as well as inexplicable fear:

Holding open a restive door,
 Looking downhill to a frothy shore?
 Summer was past and day was past.
 Somber clouds in the west were massed.
 Out in the porch's sagging floor
 (PRF: p 251)

'Restive door' indicates the restlessness of the indweller; the use of frothy suggests madness; "somber clouds" stand for ominousness of impending doom; and "sagging" symbolizes sinking spirits. In the "deeper roar" the speaker reads a deeper conspiracy against him. The house provides no shelter and "All out-of-doors" (PRF: p 108) are marshaled against him:

Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed
 (PRF: p 251)

The speaker experiences existential fear which is heightened with the realization that the satanic (snake-image) forces are not only organized against him, but also "blindly" strike. Leaves get up in a coil, hiss, - inanimates simulating animates - strike blindly, and in their over-excitement miss the target, but the terror persists that their second attempt may succeed. This snake imagery reminds the reader of man's Fall - his inheriting a reduced and diminished world. He feels that

Word I was in the house alone
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God
 (PRF: p 251)

The speaker's sense of fear is rippling from "house" to "life" to "God." In utter despair the speaker seeks the last resort of the desperate but does not feel that he will find much comfort there. Reuben A Brower (1963) observes: "what looks like the most obvious sort of relief or defense ... turns out to be ultimate threat. To be left 'in my life alone' is terror enough, more awful to be left alone with - God." (p 114) But in Frost the position of God is mostly withdrawn which heightens the threat of impending doom.

If the advice of trusting a tale, but not the artist, is taken, then any reader of "Bereft" would agree with Lionel Trilling (1962) that Frost is "a terrifying poet... a tragic poet [of] a terrifying universe." (pp 156-157) Trilling was right in comparing Frost with Sophocles and in holding that the terrible actualities of life find an altogether novel representation in Frost's poetry.

"Bereft," among Frost's most terrifying poems, "moves in part on the same lines as 'Desert Places,' from a scene of threatening images and desolation to still greater loneliness" (Reuben A. Brower 1963: p 114). Here, natural fear and personal fear are at once one. Man faced with the hostile nature cannot do much but

experience despondency and despair especially when isolated from man and God. Commenting on this poem Reginald L. Cook (1972) notes:

[T] here is also the dark aspect of the cosmic situation of man in a hostile universe. 'Bereft' illustrates this aspect. How bereft can a man feel in a universe where he is at the mercy of unleashed natural forces? Beyond solitude there is isolation, and beyond isolation there is bereftness. But beyond bereftness there is desolation and beyond desolation despair. Frost's bereftness is beyond isolation but well this side of despair. (p 267-268)

The feeling of more than just isolation is presented in this poem. But the awareness of one's own desert places -- wastelands within -- finds a unique expression in "Desert Places." The persona is experiencing, what Abraham H. Maslow calls, "the Jonah Complex," described as "the fallacy of insignificance, the certainty that you are unlucky and unimportant." (Colin Wilson 1985: 62) If nature seems aligned against the speaker, here, it threatens him and his planet with greater calamity in "Once by the Pacific" from *West Running Brook*. The poem, previously titled "Fiat Nox," contains enough ominous warning of cosmic rage to terrorize any space-age reader. (Emily E. Isaacs 1962: 42) The poem describes a scene out of Frost's memory of a Pacific storm which he saw when he was six:

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.

(PRF: p 250)

"The shattered water" forecasts the destruction it intends to bring about but what sort of destruction it is going to be is "misty." The "din" it makes is a warning that elemental nature in its fury is pitched against the precarious perch of mankind -- represented by the self watching the gushing calamity from the palisades high above. "Great waves" pushed by bigger and greater waves are smiting the shore. Their evil intention is to bring about never-in-the-past-deluge. We do not know the nature of the coming calamity and this uncertainty enhances the terror experienced by the "self" of the poem. The word "something" -- the most meaningful word in the poem -- remains enigmatic. The next two lines,

The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.

(PRF: p 250)

present "hirsute monsters and the simian wave -- creatures" (Reuben A. Brower 1963: 88) who add to the existing terror. It is not just nature personified, but terror personified, that the reader comes across. These vague and opaque figures are menacing. Norman Holland (1988) comments: "Intimations of warring personalities reach a height... when the poem pivots from the 'gleam of eyes' associated with the skies to a direct 'you.' It is as if the interpersonal conflict comes about precisely because you looked." (17) But 'gleam' can be read as the ray of delight in the eyes of the hunter on spotting a hare (recollect Frost's "The Rabbit-Hunter"). Perhaps, the intention of "All-out-of-doors" is going to be satisfied:

It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age,
Someone had better be prepared for rage.

(PRF: 250)

The ominous mad clouds and menacing waves foreshadow a catastrophic night and more, a dark age following this doomsday against which the speaker's stays become dwarfish. The ocean water shattered in the first line but more than ocean water will be shattered in the "unlucky" line thirteen "Before God's last Put out the light was spoken" (PRF: p 250) which, by extension, may be putting out the light of man on the planet. The implicit theme of the poem, according to Donald Heiney and Lenthil H. Downs (1973), is that "even in the middle of our rocky-steady [sic] rational assurance in the permanence of ourselves and our existences, we are occasionally troubled by a vague fear of the unknown, of elemental nature, ... the reference to 'God's last Put out the light' stresses the impermanence of man's works as well as mankind's very existence." (p 263)

From whatever angle we look at the poem, "Once by the Pacific," it rivals "Design" among others in its dramatization of existential terror. Not only broken water but simple leaf-fall is enough to fill man's heart with the fear of ceasing to be as is made clear in "A Leaf-Treader" (A Further Range).

Frost, the swinger of birches, the star-splitter, and the watcher of the void, is also a leaf-treader. He goes to the woods and all day long treads on leaves till he is autumn-tired, which reminds him of the approach of the autumn of his life. He is saddened by the falling leaves, which suggest that everything is heading towards an end. These leaves which hung on the branches all summer long seemed to be threatening the poet that with their fall he would also come to dust. While falling, the leaves "tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to grief." But the poet says that the fact that he belonged to another world made it clear that

...it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.

Now up, my knee, to keep on top of another year of snow.

(PRF: p 298)

The poet figure is no fugitive, no escapist, so he must decline the call and live on courageously. His sense of fear of death disappears when his courage appears and he becomes a leaf-treader instead of a leaf-dreader. This small poem deserves comparison with O' Henry's short story, "The Last Leaf," where Johnsy too experiences such a fear by reading in the fall of leaves her approaching death.

It is a small shift from the leaf-fall to snowfall in "The Onset" (New Hampshire). Keeping this and other such poems in mind Frank Lentricchia (1975) comments: The moment of encounter, when the self faces the dark wood or the raging ocean, is the moment of fear's dominion -- whether fear is motivated in the interior or in the exterior (and very often in Frost we are unable to make that determination with any confidence), the immediate problem remains one of psychological survival. We have explicit examples of this moment of crisis, the opening lines from 'The Onset' dramatize the submerging of self in a setting bathed with fear.... In the second half... the self suppresses the subversive, animistic projection of its own mind, and transcends fear and the fearful implications of the morbidly tempting dark woods of winter. (p 94)

"The Onset" is a strange poem which conveys implicitly the feeling of pessimism but explicitly, of optimism. On a fated night there is the advent of winter snow, suggestive of death, of annihilation against which there is no stay. The poet-figure stumbles, looks up, and around as if "overtaken by the end," and

Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun.

(PRF: p 226)

He is a figure of pity in the sense that before making any mark in life he is going to be done away with, without any effort to escape the sure end, especially when no evil and no good has been done by him.

In the second stanza the poet-figure gets some consolation from his observation:

I know that winter death has never tried
The earth but it has failed.

(PRF: p 226)

There is hope that the snow will melt and go downhill "like a disappearing snake." Snow becoming serpentine stream suggests evil, which goes away from sight, but does not really come to an end. The final lines of the poem:

Nothing will be left white but here a birch,
And there a clump of houses with a church.

(PRF: p 226)

Indicate that spring's victory is not complete. The whiteness of the snow is still a reminder of death and evil. These patches of snow may melt after sometime but the feeling of despair and intimation of death will linger and will repeat itself year after year, winter after winter.

The dark thoughts of expected death on a fated night, presented in a dark imagery (in both the stanzas), make it a poem of existential fear of death. James L. Potter (1980) points out:

The poetic 'stuff' of the stanza [second], in contrast to the discursive point made, is almost as pessimistic as the first stanza, and helps maintain and in fact reinforce the world view. ... one cannot easily say whether the poem represents a friendly or an unfriendly, a manageable or a difficult cosmos as its basic meaning; it suggests both simultaneously as if the threats of nature in 'Once by the Pacific' and 'The Peril of Hope' were combined with the optimism of 'A Hill-side Thaw' and 'A Prayer in Spring.' (p 131)

To cap all sorts of fears experienced by man is the fear of fellowmen, and the last and lasting fear is the fear of God as expressed in Frost's "The Fear of God." Frost's "After Apple-Picking" also explores man's experience of the greatest terror, that his best may not prove worthy in heaven's sight. In fact, "The Fear of God" and "The Fear of Man" attempt to analyze the emotion of fear rather than simply to state it. In "The Fear of God" (Steeple Bush) Frost tells us to remember our indebtedness "to an arbitrary God" when we become somebody from nobody. For James L. Potter (1980) "human pride and ambition tend to take too much credit -- man should rather consider himself fortunate to have achieved whatever he has because the God he serves is arbitrary and incomprehensible." (p 121)

Man's "unassuming" posture, "sub-ordinating look or tone," can save him from the wrath of this God, and he should always

Beware of coming too much to the surface
And using for apparel what was meant
To be the curtain of the inmost soul.

(PRF: p 385)

The dress for thought means for Frost not being literal but literatus. Frost's words may be the dress of thought but faith in God - - not strictly the God of Christian conception - - is "the curtain of the inmost soul" which can save him from the wrath of God. "The fear of God" "paints the loneliness of the soul rather than any dependence on the deity," (Howard M. Jones 1967: p 137) but the fear is there no doubt. This poem along with the succeeding one, "The Fear of man," makes clear Frost's central tenets of fear as expressed in his introduction to Robinson's King Jasper (1935): "Two fears should follow us through life: there is the fear that we shan't prove worthy in the eyes of someone who knows us at least as well as we know ourselves. That is the fear of God. And there is the fear of Man - - the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them." (E. C. Lathem and Lawrance Thompson 1972: p 347)

If "The Fear of God" is in essential accord with basic elements of Christian doctrine," (Lawrance Thompson 1966: p 562) then "The Fear of Man" (Steeple Bush) is in accord with the social doctrine of decency. T.R.S. Sharma (1981) opines that "'The Fear of Man,' despite the suggestive title, fails to focus on fear in any significant way." (115) But a perusal of the poem reveals that it not only talks of the fear of the persona but also of the poet. In unchivalrous days

... a girl no one gallantly attends

Sets forth for home at midnight from a friends' - -
She tries to make it in one catch of breath,
And this is not because she thinks of death.

(PRF: p 386)

The dash after "a friend's" is very revealing. The girl after her stay till midnight with a friend - - not a particular friend - - starts for home. The dash serves as a sign of interrogation. A friend as such may be a customer. The girl is not scared of death because she experiences "little death" (the act of sex is little death) often during her noctivagation (or nocturnal escapades.).

There are "little street lights she should trust," but she cannot because of the fear of being caught by the anti-traffic squad of the city. Her "Public Relations" (American call-girls give their profession this name) or better to call it "Public Relations" can continue in subdued lights in a better fashion. She continues her journey

So jewel - steady in the wind and dust.
Her fear is being spoken by the rude
And having her exposure misconstrued.

(PRF: p 386)

She is going on foot amidst "the wind and dust." Suggestive of her wind like visits to customers for "dirty" games. She fears being pawed, pinched and "pil-laged" by some city scoundrel. She has fears of "having her exposure misconstrued." Her exposure is at one level her coming out of the house and at the other level the exposure is of her curvaceous charms. She does not want her exposure to be mistaken as a free "favour" in the city of sky-scrappers where there is hardly "a light in all its walks." She is thankful to the assurance from Mammon, the God of wealth. She has the fear of losing her jewel of beauty before she can "bank" on the money thus collected.

The poem spotlights the fear of the girl and also of Frost:
May I in my brief bolt across the scene
Not be misunderstood in what I mean

(PRF: p 386)

Is Frost talking of being misunderstood in this very poem or in the whole of his poetry? In both, Frost fears being caught speaking obscenities. During his visit to Louis Untermeyer, in 1957, Frost "recited a quatrain which was not only blasphemous and bawdy but unprintable:

Consider now the number ten:
The O for women, the I for men.
How often one gets into zero
Proves man a laggard or a hero."

(Louis Untermeyer 1963: 374)

The girl's fear of "exposure misconstrued" and Frost's fear are the same at one

level, but Frost's fear is both of Frost, the man, and Frost, the poet, But
After so much exposure, what shame?

Dorothy Judd Hall (1984) interprets the entire poem on a different level:

The girl is, figuratively, virginal poetry - - not to be defiled by insensitive readers. The [se] final couplets embody the essence of Frost's dilemma as artist: how to reconcile communication and reserve, how to reach the sensitized reader and eschew the shallow-minded, the reader who would reduce a valid ambiguity to a false simplicity. Like the girl's virginity, the integrity of a poem must be preserved - - in reality, and for the sake of reputation." (p 16)

The dimensions of fear Frost measures in his poetry sometimes verge on terror, sometimes on despair, and at other times provide a peep into existential nothingness, but above all, and more important in many respects, his poems lay bare the feeling of existential loneliness of man. Loneliness breeds fear and fear breeds loneliness to make it terrifying loneliness.

CONCLUSION:

Man's awareness of flux brings the unwelcome guest of fear which is ever ready to breed its progeny of seen and unseen fears. Man, unaided, finds it difficult to flush it out of the house of his self. He seeks the help of reason sometimes and of instinct or emotion at other times to enable him to continue his search for meaning of his existence on this earth.

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